

Intelligent security

High-profile arrests of Tunda and Bhatkal tell the story of how India's security apparatus is getting better at border control and intelligence operations. There is a lot more to be done

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ON AUGUST 29, Indian security teams scored a major victory in their fight against terrorism when they captured Yasin Bhatkal, one of the leaders of the Indian Mujahideen, a formidable terrorist group that derives its inspiration from across the border, specifically the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Pakistan's ever-mischiefous Inter-Services Intelligence. Although we don't have all the facts, it is logical to speculate that Bhatkal's nabbing was a triumph of coordination between Indian and Nepalese agencies, and between R&AW, the IB and the NIA. It augurs well for the future fight against terrorists, both foreign and homegrown. The relationship is bound to have its ups and downs, but that should in no way be allowed to obscure the objective of strengthening national security. Nothing should be done either by the media or those in authority to dilute this harmony.

Responsible for complicity in numerous terrorist attacks, including the triple courthouse bombings in Uttar Pradesh in 2007, the 2008 simultaneous bombings in Jaipur as well as another series of simultaneous bombings the same year in Bengaluru and the German Bakery bombing in Pune in 2010, the IM has struck terror across many of India's major cities, killing hundreds of innocent civilians. A coordinated effort by India's security authorities led to engineer-turned-terrorist Bhatkal's arrest at the border between India and Nepal. Despite coming in for much criticism over the years, the country's security apparatus richly deserves the accolades it is now receiving for its role in the latest arrest.

But amidst the congratulations and backslapping, there is cause for concern and enhanced vigilance. According to a forthcoming book titled *Indian Mujahideen: Analysis and Policies* (Springer 2014) by the authors of this article, arrests of IM operatives are almost always followed a few months later by additional terror attacks. IM's forays are almost always targeted at "soft" targets,

such as market places, and often involve multiple devices and locations, usually — but not always — in the same city. With the demoralising effect of Bhatkal's arrest on its cadre, IM leaders such as Amir Reza Khan and Abdul Subhan Qureshi, who are said to be still at large in Pakistan, may decide to revitalise their operatives with fresh attacks on "soft" targets during the next three to four months. Based on their historical modus operandi, the cities most at risk are those in UP (such as Varanasi and Lucknow), as well as Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai and Jaipur. Chennai, incident-free for several years, is increasingly becoming a theatre for the demonstration of militant feelings, as evidenced by a procession some Muslim organisations took out last September close to the US consulate on the arterial Anna Salai. This was to protest against an

American movie that had allegedly denigrated Islam. Chennai Police will remain anxious on this score. Undaunted by Bhatkal's arrest, elements of the IM may be expected to bounce back. The official counter-offensive requires a strong and widespread intelligence presence and police station-level alertness that would sharpen the protection of crowded places in these cities. This would pose a formidable challenge, even with professionally trained intelligence staff, something India does not uniformly possess. Moreover, the book points out that it is vital to keep track of public communications issued by the IM (including claims of responsibility for past attacks and attempts to embarrass India by threatening attacks before the 2010 Commonwealth Games). It will, therefore, be critical to monitor any public statements put out

by the IM in the next few weeks. Their tenor may be one of bravado. But it is backed by some solid yet destructive achievements on the field that can hardly be ignored.

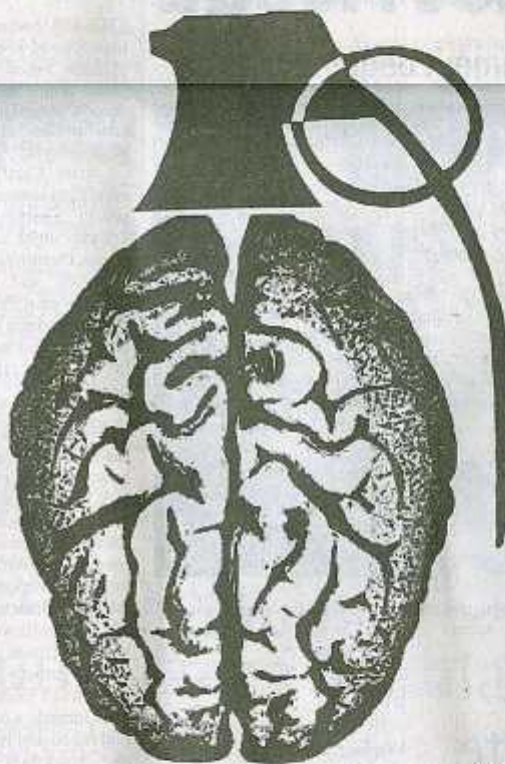
An even greater intelligence coup could include more details of how the ISI facilitates the travel of IM operatives, enabling them to receive training in Pakistani camps, including those run by the LeT. The precise nature of the relationship between the IM, LeT, ISI, and Dawood Ibrahim's D-Company is murky, though the evidence of complicity of these entities in terrorist attacks within India is overwhelming. Bhatkal, as a leader of the IM, is undoubtedly well informed. Previous arrests have yielded valid Pakistani passports issued to IM operatives. The fact that Bhatkal was able to travel extensively not only to the Persian Gulf and Pakistan, but also the US, implies that he received abundant support during the last 10

able, but that does not mean there are no others. One may not be able to prove a direct ISI hand in all this, which is why it is essential to locate individuals who provide the conduit.

In past weeks, two high-profile arrests on the porous India-Nepal border — this one, and of LeT bomb-maker Tunda — tell the story of how Indian security is getting better at both border control and intelligence operations. At the same time, we should be conscious that the IM is likely to adapt itself adroitly to the increased smartness of Indian agencies. And with support from its sponsors, there is little doubt that new weak points along the border will be identified so as to facilitate the travel of IM operatives. India needs to extend the definition of its border, perhaps by assisting Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka to implement better border controls so that Pakistani passports issued to terror operatives are quickly identified there, providing a second line of defence. Such support will also assist these nations in better counter-terror operations within their own national boundaries.

This summer's intelligence successes deserve our warmest congratulations, but there is a lot more to do. While R&AW and the IB have their jobs cut out for them, the NIA interrogations will have to be more aggressive and focused if they are to be productive. The NIA is slowly acquiring an élan that is heartwarming, dispelling earlier misgivings about its capacity. This setting implies also a greater willingness to be transparent in dealing with foreign intelligence apparatuses, especially the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation. The reported differences of opinion over the David Headley issue may have to be papered over, and a fresh start at collaboration with the FBI given a chance to succeed.

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years. Finding out who facilitated such travel, and how, will be critical in reducing IM operations in the future. This is why Bhatkal's interrogation by the NIA in the next few days assumes great importance.

One recommendation in the book is that India build a comprehensive travel information system that tracks any movement both within and outside India that uses public transportation (planes, trains, buses, ships), and that such travel intelligence must not be limited to India alone but span, at the very least, all of the Middle East and Asia. Moreover, added intelligence on how the IM is financed could be another potential intelligence bonanza. It is critical to have detailed information on who finances IM operations and who helps it move money from one source to another. The hawala route is highly prob-